United Nations E/CN.6/2019/NGO/120

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
27 November 2018

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Sixty-third session
11–22 March 2019
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century"

Statement submitted by World Federation of Trade Unions, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

18-20323 (E) 191218

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Statement

It is a great joy to us, women unionists affiliated in the ranks of the big family of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), being here today, among women who travelled from every corner of the world in order to attend this annual date which has turned out to be a real institution by the United Nations.

This year's priority theme has a special importance, as it constitutes the very core of trade union action since the early steps of the union movement.

Before analysing our vision on how we can achieve an effective social protection system and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, it is worth taking a look at the situation of working women today, at a global level:

Nowadays, the working woman is the object of harsh exploitation. She works mainly in part-time, uninsured, and temporary jobs. She is being paid less than what men are paid. She has a smaller pension. She is the first to become unemployed and suffers the brutal consequences of unemployment. In many countries, violence against women is on the rise, prostitution is spreading, economic migration is separating many mothers from their children, their husbands and deprives them of the right to education, to cultural activity, to free time. All these are consequences of the so-called globalization, consequences that can't be overlooked or stay out of the context of today's debate.

According to the European Union statistical data (Eurostat), two thirds of the 800 million illiterate people globally today are women. Among the children that do not attend school, 3 out of 5 are girls. According to the same data, thirty one percent (31 per cent) of working women in Europe are employed in part-time positions.

The data also reveal that around one million people annually fall victim to sex trafficking, 900 thousand of whom are women and girls. The conditions for women are extremely bad in all continents. In Africa, AIDS is spreading among the female population, in India around two thousand pregnancies are being prematurely terminated daily, because families wish to have only male offspring. Around ninety percent (90 per cent) of the victims of the armed confrontations and wars are non-combatants, among them the large majority women and children.

These data and numbers speak for themselves. They reveal the true picture of the so-called "female issue". They highlight in the most blatant way that the problems we have to face not only they do not belong to the past, but they are still here, more present and acute than ever.

On social protection infrastructures

The debate on the social protection system and units is more timely and necessary than ever before, given that the offensive unleashed against our rights and the wave of large-scale privatizations, the dismantling of main social security infrastructures, the weakening of the right to free access to health for all or the deterioration of the -already poor- social solidarity infrastructures for unemployed and under-employed, all these phenomena cannot but be of concern for the working women population.

Especially now, in the 21st Century, when the wealth produced is even bigger, these infrastructures could be even more efficient, strengthened and on the level of the working woman's modern needs. On the contrary, even the existing scientific and technical knowledge for the possible improvement of the already existing infrastructures does not seem to interest the big corporate interests which develop

their activity on the social protection sectors. By contrast, the scientific and technical knowledge (often produced by public institutions and with funds that belong to all), is being shaped in order the exploitation of workers to be increased, creating more unemployment and immigration. This way, state infrastructures' role is being reduced to mere "bystanders" in the production and distribution of the wealth produced (for its concentration). At the same time, taxes are increased for those who work and live on the income of their work while pardons and tax incentives are granted to big businesses and capital transfer to tax havens is facilitated.

State funds are deliberately cut-off when it's about public services and state social functions of quality, universal and accessible to all. On the contrary, working people's money are destined to pay off a debt they have never created, "feeding" this way financial capital's greed for profit.

As a result, even more reactionary policies rise up, leading to the increase of military arms and the plundering of peoples' wealth-producing resources. The seeking of new energy routes and transport channels turns the situation even more dangerous for the people. On the other hand, trade union and political freedoms are dramatically restrained while fundamental social rights are being eliminated. The deny people their inalienable right to progress and social justice.

Thus, the dismantling of social protection systems can be analysed in the context of the above mentioned policies. Whatever should be public and a common property of everyone, now it is being privatized or dismantled. Workers and, especially the working women, are denied their basic right to essential goods as well as to healthcare, social security, education, housing, transport, justice, culture etc. Prices are rising, redundancies are increasing, recruitment is decreasing, degrading contracts and conditions of work and provision of services, closing down of services and establishments, quality and the rights of workers and users are reduced. The attack on the rights of Public Administration workers has a double effect, degrading their working and living conditions as well as the services and social functions provided. Denial of the right to employment, cuts in wages, freezing of careers, blocking collective bargaining and contracting, limitations on freedom of association and other collective rights – in particular the right to strike – increased working time and the proliferation of precariousness is detrimental to both workers and users.

As far as World Federation of Trade Unions is concerned, it struggles, uniting the voices of men and women workers in order to turn the tide, defending public social protection system services and the social protection infrastructures, against social injustice and on the benefit of people's rights.

That's why the World Federation of Trade Unions highlights on its agenda and inside women's movement the need for:

- Opposing the externalization and privatization of public services and social functions of the states;
- Advocating wage increases, reducing working hours and overall improvement of the working and living conditions of workers;
- Demanding the end of precariousness and the principle that every permanent job must correspond to an effective working link;
- Defending the maintenance and creation of jobs with rights and with quality;
- Defending trade union freedom and the right to collective bargaining and contracting;

- Rejecting charitable policies and advocating a fairer distribution of wealth through the creation or improvement of public services and social functions of states;
- Advocating the closure of all tax havens, as well as the so-called free trade agreements.

On gender equality and women's empowerment

How are we going to achieve gender equality while so much are still being written and told about it? How can all these demands mentioned above can promote woman's position in today's society?

On the basis of what has been outlined above, it becomes apparent that when we speak of the "female issue", we speak of the additional exploitation and the oppression that women endure from society as a result of their gender (that is, a combination of societal and gender discrimination). These discriminations have mental, cultural and moral repercussions, since women are prevented from developing their abilities in full and from attaining full equality. These negative repercussions mostly concern the working women, the poor peasants or the self-employed strata.

To us, the World Federation of Trade Unions, the solution and the way out is found in the common struggles of women and men for the improvement of their lives, taking into consideration the biological special needs of the women. And of course, this comes through social structures capable of defending motherhood, as a contemporary need of working mothers in the 21st century.

Specifically, what is needed is:

- Adequate pre and post-natal paid maternity leave. Banning of the dismissals of pregnant women. Parental leave with full healthcare and insurance. Banning of night-shifts and hazardous work for the women before and after giving birth.
- Decisive confronting of the unemployment rates through a development path that make use of the natural wealth-producing resources, the land and the industries to satisfy the working women needs all over the world.
- Free, public and qualitative Healthcare System that will take care of all the people of all the ages in any of their needs; vaccinations, regular HIV tests, proper medication for all the occasions.
- Free, public and qualitative Education System from the kindergarten to the university. An educational process that would make sure that people receive general knowledge and specialized education, to grow up and become an integrated personality utilizing fully its capabilities for the benefit of the society.
- Full-time, Stable job with dignified salaries. 7 hours a day, 5 days a week, 35 hours a week.
- Real and sufficient house subsidy or loans without interest for the young couples.
- A network of real free, public and qualitative services that will assist the family, the child, the elderly, the people with special needs, in order for the life of the woman to be improved. Free, public and qualitative kindergartens, old-homes, vacation facilities, restaurants at the working places.

Because it is only through a network like this that we will manage to empower women position in today's society. Because only in a society where all woman's needs are universally and essentially covered, today's women an be really free. This is when she is going to be able to become a decisive factor and "agent" of social progress on

the benefit of all. We must continue, also through this international stage, analyzing and discuss openly and vigorously. By exchanging our experience we also enrich our perception on what is happening in our respective countries. We must make proposals and set goals for the future of this Special Committee's activities.

We hope that this Conference will be one more step forward towards the analysis of the today's duties which will lead to woman's empowerment which ultimately can only be understood as the working woman's empowerment in society and for the society. Thank you very much"